THE STORY OF AN OAK TREE.

'Tis a marvel to me how so short-lived a creature as man should yet contrive to crowd so much that is eventful and interesting in the short span of years that makes his life. Perhaps the sap in his limbs circulates more freely than it does in ours—perhaps he is a quicker, higher intelligence. Be that as it may, I, who have lived four hundred years, have not suffered or enjoyed as do men who only reach four score years. Moreover, there are some who do not live longer than twenty years—tender sapling, as it were, who yet seem glad to lie down and rest in the earth. Truly, it seems sad to me that they should so greatly care to lie still and be forgotten by all, seeing that it is the one great desire of our young seed to free itself from the clinging soil and stand erect, facing the keen winds of heaven. Yet, I know full well that men have great trials to bear, for I myself have seen much of human sorrow.

The story I am about to tell is one that I understand well, for I saw its beginning and its tragic end. It is as well known to my neighbors as to my young branches; oftentimes have I told it the latter while they were yet children, and I had much ado to rock them to sleep with the wind's help.

Indeed, the wind is a great ally of mine. He brings me news of the wonderful outer world, and he has helped me in the compilation of this story, being a keen and rapid observer of men and their actions. He it was who told me there was mischief abroad; and it was he who explained to me the mystery of the booming noises and the cries and moanings that were wafted to me from the other side of the great moors, and who were the various men that rode past me hurriedly, some pale and sad, others gay and elated—all stained with the dust of the roadside and the strange, beautiful-colored human blood.

It was on a still day in June, a little after such mysterious noises and sounds, that I first saw a strange sight—naught else but a woman, beautiful and young, supporting on her arm a young man who seemed sick of some disease. One of his limbs hung listlessly by his side, and his pale face was encompassed by a bandage. He seemed faint and weary, and methought eager to finish his pilgrimage on earth, for he made many objections and mutterings.

"Sweetheart," he said (and the tone of his voice was like the speech of the west wind to my tenderest leaflets), "let me alone to die here, as all my companions have died. Do not, I pray you, risk your beautiful life. I have seen you once again—therefore can I bear to die."

But she was resolute, though so young. She called to another woman, older, more gnarled than she. Counting as men count, this one might have borne fifty winters, while it seemed as if the younger had barely known twenty summers, and her name well suited the ruggedness of her exterior.

"Elizabeth," she cried, the young and pretty one. "I pray you help me lay him on the moss," and the other answered, "Yes, my lady."

Then the two women, with a marvelous amount of care, helped the man to recline on the soft, green moss that creeps along the ground to my roots. 'Twas then I noticed that he had a wounded foot which caused him to halt in his walk, and lean somewhat upon the slender woman; and I was much grieved thereat, having myself, long ago, received a hurt on my roots, and recalling how much suffering I endured. When they had helped him to lay himself down, he caught eagerly at the loose drapery of the young woman's dress and spoke hurriedly. "Dorothy! sweetheart! You must leave me now. It maddens me to lie here a useless log, and see you expose yourself to dangers for my sake! See, this oak will shelter me until I die; there were no better, sweeter death-place, except your dear arms, in the world, I think."

Then she looked down on him with a flush on her sweet face, and a light came into her eyes.

"My dearest," she said, "you have spoken well; the oak shall shelter you until you are healed of your hurt. 'Tis leafy, and has branches which will afford you a resting and a hiding place. And then," she continued, and the red blood mounted to her cheeks, "I shall find means for you to escape to Holland, and you will be happy yet, sweetheart."

But he shook his head.

"Dorothy, if aught happened to you through my fault, there is nothing on earth below, or in heaven above, that would compensate me for it. Think of my lying here, maddening with the thought that you have been stopped on the way. 'Twere better to drag myself to Scarborough and let my enemies see how a man of honor can die! Better then lying here, trembling lest my sweetheart meet with disaster I should be impotent to avert."

But she knelt down beside him. "I pray you, Ralph," she said, "let me work my own will. I will take such care that none shall track me, or even watch me, for discovery would mean death to you, sweetheart. Let me have my willful way, Ralph."

Then there was a silence between them, and I waved my branches gently in order to show them that I would do my best to shield them from the enemies they seemed to fear. My leaves were so thick that the good sunshine could scarce pierce to the place where they sat, which, methinks, must surely have been an advantage to them. 'Twas fortunate they sought shelter this bright summer time when the leaves sat thick on the branches, instead of in the winter, when they stand bare and shivering, the sport of unruly winds. I have heard it said that most trees have been doomed to suffer in this wise for the fault of the one tree that was too tempting to the first man and woman, who were placed for their trial in a garden. How this may be I know not, but it has always seemed to me a cruel thing that our leaves should fall when we are most in need of them.

"I pray you make no coward of me, Dorothy," said the man at last, "for you know whatever you bid me do I must do. I can deny you nothing, sweet."

Then she, exultant, sprang to her feet and paced me round, looking at me the while with admiring eyes, whereby I was like to be much uplifted, for I felt great pride in my comeliness, inasmuch as it was to be of use in sheltering this pair of lovers. Mistress Dorothy scanned me deliberately, seeking a safe resting place for him she loved, and though some of my younger branches stretched out their arms to make themselves attractive in her eyes (young branches have a wonderful way of obtruding themselves), she would have none of them, but chose a thick sturdy limb which was bravely covered by short and leafy branches, and when, after much deliberation, she had at last come to a satisfactory conclusion, she called her attendant, and with great care and tenderness helped the man to attain the selected branch, and then took leave of him with much sadness, and many warnings that he would not attempt the descent too often, as the enemy were still scouring the moors. All of this he promised—more, I think, to comfort and pacify her than from any thought of his own safety; for when she was about to leave him he begged she would not have any more thought of him, for that he knew she would never be wife of his. "Sweetheart," he said at parting, "bid me good-bye, and waste no thought on me. I am not worth one of your tears. In after times you will find some happier, you could not find a fonder, lover; and then you will forget the bitter days and this helpless love of mine."

The poor lady was as pale as an ash tree when she wished her lover adieu and bade him rest comforted in God's keeping, and then he whispered and begged her for something that he seemed to desire more than life. It was, I believe, a kiss that he sought, though why men make so much ado about so slight a thing has always been a marvel to me. However, she yielded, and truly it seemed as if the kiss possessed healing properties, he seemed so content; perchance that is the reason it is held in such high esteem.

'Twas long before the mistress and maid were outside my earshot. I could hear the converse betwixt the two as they walked along, and I gathered that the stricken man was one Sir Ralph Andover, most zealous in the cause of our king; that he had been sorely wounded in a battle which had taken place at no great distance from me, on a moor named Marston; that his mistress had found him in an old barn near the field of battle (whither his servant had carried him), and had borne him, sorely wounded as he was, to the shelter of this wood. By some fatality it seemed that the father and brother of the young lady were upholding the opposite cause, whereat I marveled greatly, seeing that she appeared of gentle nurture, and I knew that none but the unworthy could wage war against the king of the realm. I felt this keenly, inasmuch as I and my family had from time beyond count been surnamed monarch of the forest, therefore it seemed to me that this poor warred-against king must be a human kinsman of mine.

The forsaken man sighed oft and piteously as he watched his heart's beloved disappear, and a great despair seemed to fall on him. Before her departure Mistress Dorothy had bandaged his wounds; perchance he sighed from pain of them, though to me it seemed as if 'twere from some deeper grief. I had hoped that the kind rain would have fallen, having a grateful remembrance of how it had comforted and healed me when I was sick of my broken limb, but 'twas not to be; and when the dusky night crept over the forest and the stars came out, he grew garrulous, speaking aloud, as if he could no longer restrain himself. He called on "Dorothy! Dorothy!" as if seeking to comfort himself by the sound of her name, and sang her praises in measures whose endings had one and the same sweet sound that I thought comparable only to the melodious tinkling of the brook which the wind sometimes wafts to me. I believe, though I know not whether it be really so, that men call this sweet, running, rippling sound "poetry."

I bent my head with its crest of leaves—my crown 'tis called by the other tree—over this poor, forsaken lover, and the breezes sang him a lullaby; and when the night grew darkest the firefly brought me word that he slept.

That night there fell a prodigious silence over the forest, nor had I ever known it to lie so hushed. 'Twas as if some subtle sympathy with the pain and despair of the poor human soul had awed my kinsmen. I would fain have thanked them. 'Tis strange how trust begets love. I now felt a great and protecting interest in these two poor souls, though they were so lately known to me. They have long left this beautiful earth, yet there still remains to me a remembrance of love and passion beyond the understanding of my kin. For we do not comprehend love, as men love, though the sun makes it so hotly to us every summertide. To be sure, he leaves us to be chilled by winter's frosts, and therein it would seem that human love differs from ours—but, there, I know so little of it!

'Twas not until two days had gone that the lady came again. Her lover had crawled down from his hiding-place, and, with ears open to every sound, was anxiously listening for her footsteps. I had so identified myself with the two that I, too, felt as if my mistress were coming; and when time passed and she came not, I understood the pallor of his cheek, and almost muttered with him, "Some mischance has befallen her, or else she would be here." I grew dismayed whenever I thought of the long journey that she, a weak woman, must needs make before she could reach her lover, for the notion of moving frightens us trees. But at last I saw him flush with a flush that meant joy, and saw him start and drag himself forward; and then 'twas no surprise to hear the rustle of a woman's gown and a glad cry of "Dorothy!"

But she hushed him in great alarm. "I pray you whisper, sweetheart," she said, in a low voice. "I fear my coming hither has been noticed. My father and brother talk much of you at home; they have never forgotten the former days. My brother swears that you shall die; but I have sworn you shall live, and we shall see who will prevail."

All the while she spoke he had her hands prisoned in his. They were so like small white doves, pretty, fluttering things, half-trying to free themselves, half clinging to his fingers. Methinks he was too spent with weary watching to speak much, and too happy at the sight of his beloved to greatly feel the need of speech, noticing which she grew gradually silent and soon ceased her pretty babble.

At last he spoke. "Sweetheart, I thought you were never coming to me again. You cannot tell what I suffer at the thought of aught befalling you. I can think of nothing but you. Sweet, I long to let my thoughts dwell on my cause and my country, but to no avail—you drive out all other thoughts."

It seemed that this confession did not anger her. If it did, she concealed her wrath, for she answered gently, "And my thoughts are always with you, Ralph. I have turned schemer in your behalf. I endure my cousin's love-making—nay, sometimes encourage it, so it may blind him. I have been burning with impatience to come to you, and yet have been obliged to conceal it. To-day I have been obliged to feign sickness, and my maid is stationed at my door giving news of me this moment—and I am so well, seeing that I am with my love!"

She was so tender and so sweet that I did not marvel at Sir Ralph's exceeding love. He feasted his eyes on her, and his glance betrayed that he thought her very fair. Meanwhile she busied herself preparing a new bandage wherewith to bind his maimed foot, and whilst she busied herself about it she babbled on, telling him many things that had come to pass these last two days. At news of the poor king, who was struggling against the people he loved, Sir Ralph looked grave indeed. It seemed that there was nothing to do but to ship to Holland, whither many a brave and loyal heart had carried its broken fortunes. "But I cannot leave you, sweetness," said Sir Ralph, "I'll die here, gladly, too, better than live without you."

Then she brought him to speak more prudently, and reminded him of his youth, of the beauty of the world, the flowers that bloomed and the sun that shone, of the winds that might yet blow the breath of liberty over the glad land. She spoke to him of all this, but he only shook his head. "I'll die here," was all he said. She left him with reluctance, and that evening he spent talking aloud as was his wont, speaking so much of his mistress that, had she not been so fair, we might have taken umbrage at his so doing, but we could not blame him, and love's talk is pleasant to a forest at night timewhen all is attuned in harmony to it.

So day succeeded day until nearly a month had passed, and I grew accustomed to playing the part of host. Sometimes the lady came, and then it seemed as if the sun were shining more merrily, the birds singing more lustily, and the very herbage seemed to give out stronger scent wherewith to greet her. But when she deemed her coming might lead to discovery and stayed away, all around grew dark and dreary; the rainclouds trooped like crows, and there was no sound save the splash of rain drops on the leaves, and the plaintive cry of the wood pigeon. Sir Ralph was very patient those days, very patient, yet methinks most unhappy. 'Twas as if his idleness were painful to him, and also that he disliked being served by a woman, though such service pleased her in the extreme.

This had lasted a long while until one day, when, after a long interval of waiting, she came to him again. She smiled a little when she first greeted him, but seemed of so frail an appearance that he grew alarmed. "Sweetheart, what ails you?" he asked; and she made answer: "There is danger abroad. Troops are scouring the country eager to find you. I fear that it is I who, by my coming hither, have put these bloodhounds on your track. Yet what would you have me do? I was forced to come and see with mine own eyes that my dearest was unhurt; I could not stay at home; and you must forgive my womanly tremors if aught befall you through me."

Then he comforted her, and bade her to be of good cheer, saying that her loving care of him must bring naught but good to him. But in the midst of this sweet talk there suddenly was heard a sound as of the distant tramp of horses. Sir Ralph listened a moment, and then spoke on of idle things; but there was little need for him to feign to her, for her quick ear had caught the sound even before it had reached him. The two pale faces betrayed the fear that each was suffering for the other; the two pairs of eyes looked love at each other; and the two poor beating, throbbing hearts leapt and quivered with one anxious dread.

"We must conceal ourselves," whispered Dorothy. "For the love of heaven, no word, Ralph."

"Sweetheart," he answered, "there is yet time. Leave me; you can reach the farmhouse where your horse waits before my pursuers gain the forest. There may be danger for you if you remain."

Then a wan smile crossed her face, and she shook her pretty head, the which caused the merry curls to dance and jig around her drows—a frolic much at variance with the sadness that lay on them. "I shall remain with you," she said resolutely; and he was fain to let her bide.

Therefore, they sought my shelter, and concealed themselves as best they could amongst my boughs. They sat close, supported by a strong branch, his arms around her, both silent with a great fear. And the sound grew nearer and nearer until the noise of the horses' hoofs ever approaching seemed like blows of a hammer falling on the green sward. And I could hear these two anxious hearts beating in unison; and I conld see their faces, hers drawn with anguish and fear for the safety of the man she loved, and his full of passionate, self-forgetting devotion. She bent forward, straining her eyes, he held her hand, and neither uttered a syllable.

And now the sounds grew more distinct, as did those poor lovers' heartbeats. Then there came borne upon the wings of the wind (methinks my faithful friend strove by such means to warn us of our impeding peril), stray sentences and cruel laughter. Once the deep baying of a hound caused the girl to shiver with such dread that Ralph Andover was fain to whisper (though such whisper might have cost him his life), "'Tis no bloodhound, sweet," and her white lips strove to smile an answer. Nearer and nearer came the sounds, and the outlines of human forms grew clear. Would they stop? See, the foremost man had already passed, and my lady had already sighed a great sigh of relief, when one of them stepped out of the ranks and presently dismounted. At sight of him Mistress Dorothy's heart gave a great bound which sent my leaves quivering. She forced her slender fingers into my boughs and pressed her lips close so that she might not cry out; the sweet blood forsook her cheeks, and her eyes that could look so tender grew fierce with hate and dilated from fear.

He who approached alone seemed a person of distinction; there was that within him that spoke of the practiced warrior and the habit of command. Methought he could not fail to notice the upturned moss and the signs of disturbance everywhere. Yet was his face inscrutable as he looked up, and seemed but to mark the blueness of the sky visible betwixt my branches. He gazed earnestly at me, and, to my great dismay, a bird, which had become familiarized with the lovers' presence, set up a loud and cheerful caroling, pouring out its delight in dear, thrilling song, at which the lady was like to faint. Then the stranger looked up and said betwixt his teeth, "The pretty traitor, innocent babbler!" and a smile curled his lips and gave a sinister expression to his face. Then he tore down some tender saplings and cut some initials on the moss, thereby, it seemed to me, to make the place recognizable to himself, and presently he mounted his horse and rode away, singing some merry song with a mocking refrain as he went. So great was his haste that a terrible fear that he was about to acquaint his companions with the discovery he had made came upon me. By reason of my superior hight I could scan the country round, but I could not see that the horseman who had just left did aught else but rejoin the troop.

Meanwhile the poor, pale lady, now that the danger was past, broke out into piteous weeping, though she was careful to check her sobs. Ralph Andover was obliged to stand by and see his mistress weep, though at sight of her tears his own began to fall. I could not but note the difference betwixt these tears, for whilst hers were like a passing summer shower, balmy and refreshing, his were like the drops of a thunder-cloud, heavy with sense of greater evil to some.

Sir Ralph had so far recovered from his hurt that he could move about more easily. The lady had cast herself on the ground, and, laying her soft cheek on my rugged trunk, was weeping bitterly. Though so old and rugged, her tears penetrated to my very heart, and I would cheerfully have sacrificed a limb to have been able to give these poor lovers some solace. He knelt down beside her and strove, not quite vainly, to comfort her; but when he spoke his voice was stern.

"Sweetheart," he said, "this must now end. I will no longer be hounded and hunted like a malefactor, thereby exposing you to perils innumerable. I will no longer subject you to the risk of being discovered, perhaps reviled by ill-mannered fellows. I am almost cured of my wound, and shall soon be able to use my foot until I can honorably meet my enemies. I will hide no more! One parting kiss, sweetheart, and the cruelest of our suffering is overpast!"

Then she arose and looked at him. "I swear to you," she cried, passionately, "that this shall cease. One day's more concealment is all I ask of you. I have spoken to one I can trust, a captain of a merchant vessel, and he has promised to convey you to Holland. Therefore, for my sake, sweetheart, bear this ignominy but one day longer." And then a great flush crept over her cheeks and brows. "For their taunts or revilings I care not one jot," she cried. "The curs who come spying and jesting while your life is at stake!"

Whereat Ralph, for answer, took his mistress in his arms and kissed her reverently, at which I was not much amazed, seeing that every man's heart must have been touched by her tenderness and love.

"Sweet," he said gently, yet a little huskily, "I will remain a day longer, since you so much desire it. Yet to what end? I do not greatly covet life. All beauty will have died out of it. Dorothy, love, he added, with a short, sharp sob like a stab. "My sweetheart! do not ask me to live without you."

Then there fell a great silence; and methought I perceived a struggle in Dorothy's face, for by turns she grew rosy red and then ashen pale, and it seemed as if she would fain speak, yet could no words force themselves through the slender column of her throat; it seemed as if they all lay prisoned there, until there arose a sound like the gurgling of brooks that have been ice-bound, and—"Heart's dearest, I am coming with you," she said.

Then he fell on his knees and kissed the hem of her dress, and thanked her and blessed her, and wept, and for very love of her could say nothing that was distinct to her or to me; yet methinks we both understood. So happy were they in this new recognizance of their mutual love that they almost forgot their fear of discovery, until Dorothy's eye fell on the initials newly cut in the moss.

"My cousin need not have feared," she said with exceeding bitterness, "that I should have forgotten his visit. Sweetheart, you would never leave me in the hands of such a man!"

"Nay," he answered tenderly. "I would leave you in no man's hands. But has not this plan of yours danger for you? There must be no danger for you, sweetheart."

"I have set my woman's wit to work," answered Dorothy, "and have contrived a plan whereby to assure your safety and our happiness—only you must let me work my will."

There was a silence again between the two, a silence prodigiously more expressive than words, such silence as falls between the soft gusts of wind when it comes fondling and caressing my young branches. I knew its meaning well, not having lived four hundred years, and observed nature all the while in vain; nor was I surprised to find the faces of the twain pale with the love light shining in their eyes.

'Twas long before Mistress Dorothy could bring herself to leave her lover, and when she went all brightness seemed to have gone with her for Sir Ralph Andover. "It cannot be," he muttered; "the gods were never on my side"; and then he fell to talking to me. "My last night with you, old oak!" he said. "Ah, good tree! if you could but talk, what a tale you would tell of a sweet, brave woman's devotion. I would I felt more light-hearted, for my soul is overburdened with vague fears. It seems as if this were to be my last night on earth; nor do I greatly grieve at that, for life with Dorothy would mean too much happiness, and joy and I have always been strangers."

'Tis certain that I must have been made of poor stuff, for I felt so much anxiety on behalf of these two who trusted me that I could get no sleep. 'Twas a sultry night, not a breath stirring, no moon, and the stars were shining sullenly, as if vexed to be obliged to light the whole heavens. I felt much as I do before the advent of the great disturbance men call a thunderstorm; my sap coursed languidly through my limbs, my leaves felt gathering. I feared for myself, for 'tis always the highest that falls, and the forked lightning seeks his prey relentlessly. But through the long night no thunder came, naught to break its terrible monotony, and when the first streak of dawn lit the heavens I was glad indeed. There was ill-luck in the air. I felt it. A chattering magpie, with its home perchance in the very castle that sheltered Dorothy, brought me disturbing tidings. "They are out and about," he said, "all out and about, the armed men. Let your guest be careful. If he would but stay quiet where he is, all might be well; but she will be here soon, and he will go straight to his death, poor soul!"

'Twas vain that I called the magpie a foolish chatterer. I could not feel hopeful for the success of this day's adventure, and despair came over me when I thought that aught but success must mean death to either or both of them. But I could not give Sir Ralph even the smallest warning. Even he, who was patience itself, grew impatient this morning, for the slow hours seemed to take a malign pleasure in lingering, so that even I grew wroth with the order of nature which refuses to bend to the desires of man. The misty night had begotten a misty day, and its gloom seemed but a reflex of my foreboding fears. Sir Ralph's spirits were the like oppressed, for he sighed grievously and often looked at the heavens to see why they frowned so steadily at him. Alas, there were no pleasant spots of blue to make a bright patchwork with the green of my leaves, no golden sunlight to touch my crest with glory and crown me king. 'Twas as if some dire calamity must needs befall, the forest looked so drear and colorless.

Sir Ralph waited almost all the day, holding himself in readiness. 'Twas pitiful to see so much hope and fear alternating on a human face. At last there appeared in the distance two figures, which I discovered to be the lady and her maid; they were carrying the apparel in which it was necessary Sir Ralph should disguise himself. At sight of his dear mistress he threw off all restraint, and flinging himself on the green sward at her feet, besought her passionately not to expose her dear person to such danger.

"You have done so much for me already," he said. "Sweetheart, let me accomplish my escape alone."

"And would you leave me?" she asked quite calmly.

"I would rather leave you than do you hurt," he said gravely, with pale lips.

"Nay," she cried, passionately, "you do me but this wrong, that you cause me continually to play the man's part. That is the only hurt that will come to me through you."

Then the tears sprang into Sir Ralph's eyes, and he whispered humbly: "Sweetheart, indeed I am not worthy of your love."

The manner of men and women has always been a marvel to me. That they should love one another I can understand, but what need to deem themselves unworthy of each other? Withal, why should so small a matter as a kiss be so potent a reply? Dorothy, for answer, laid her lips upon her lover's, as if by that means she were rendering him more worthy; it seemed to me a new way of bestowing knighthood.

And after this episode the lady beckoned her maid and brought Sir Ralph some wearing apparel wherewith to disguise himself, whereat he pulled a wry face. "A woman's clothing, my Dorothy," he said. Then she told him of her plot, which necessitated his assuming her maid's disguise, and entreated him to do for her sake what he would not do for his own. And all the time that she was begging of him to do her will I was disturbed by sounds of distant horses and of men's voices coming nearer; and from my high eminence I saw bands of men stationed at intervals so as to surround the forest. Had the lovers not been so engrossed with each other they must have heard the warning sounds. A jangle of spurs louder than any gone before roused her at last. She sprang to her feet, and cried in a voice of despair so great it must have thrilled the hardest of hearts: "Dear Lord! what noise was that?"

Sir Ralph hastened to her side to reassure her, but even while the words of comfort were yet lingering on his lips, the trampling of horses' feet grew more distinct, and men's forms began to be dimly visible through the trees.

Then did the poor lady fall into a fit of the most piteous weeping; so greatly was I touched thereat that I trembled in all my branches, and my very leaves fell from sympathy. But Sir Ralph only drew his dear mistress close to his heart, bidding her waste no tears on him; he exhorted her to courage, but as every fresh sound smote her ear she shivered and seemed to grow more white and wan. At last a shout from the soldiers apprised them that their hiding place had been discovered. Soon they were surrounded by a troop of horsemen, conspicuous amongst whom was the man who had made such careful inspection of the spot before.

None durst touch Sir Ralph as he stood calm and composed, his defiant eyes resting on him who appeared to be leader. No violence seemed likely to be offered him, seeing that he made no efforts to defend himself; indeed, it seemed to me as if there was a pity in the eyes of the man at sight of poor, despairing Dorothy, who leant, half-swooning, against her lover. "You are my prisoner," at last said he whom we had seen before; and then dismounting, with a courteous air he asked him to give up his sword. Then Sir Ralph laughed, and said quietly, "That will I never do," whereat the other seemed undecided; seeing which Dorothy made a motion to throw herself upon her knees, but her lover restrained her. "Sweetheart," he whispered, "you shall not abase yourself for me," and was silent. Methought he gained in size and dignity as he looked around upon the number who had come to take him prisoner—one man against so many. Even they, vile rebels as they were, seemed awed by his majestic presence and dignity of demeanor. "By your favor," he said courteously, "I will explain my presence here and that of this, my most honored mistress"; and he stretched out his hand which she took and held in hers, so that together they faced their enemies, chiefest of which were (as I afterward learned) her brother, and her cousin who would also be her lover.

This cousin of hers must have been touched with some slight compassion, for he answered, "Speak, Sir Ralph; but before you say aught that could harm either yourself or the lady we all love, listen to my conditions."

"Nay," cried Sir Ralph, "I'll have none of them! This lady whom you all love is my heart's dearest, and the most devoted sweetheart a man ever had, but now all that is over. Dorothy, sweetest, it must be good-by to you and life! Be brave and leave me in the hands of these—gentlemen. I am ready to do their bidding."

Then Andrew Elton answered: "Since you are so tenacious of death you shall find it, but listen first. For the love of this fair lady, who holds you, I believe in some slight favor, and who now, with her father's consent, stands pledged my wife, I am willing to give you your life; you shall take ship to Holland and finish your days there in peace and security."

Then Sir Ralph laughed out loud, so that my very leaves laughed, too, and a fierce light burned in his eyes, and he courteously, yet mockingly, saluted him who had spoken. "I thank you for your mercy," he cried; and then he grew angry and spoke sternly. "What do you take me for, you rogues and rebels? Shall I accept my life at your hands and give up my dearest mistress? I would rather die ten thousand deaths than accept one boon from you! Hear me once for all, you murderous enemies to your land! I would not that you even thought to do me some slight favor. I will accept none! Had it not been for her I love, I should not now be bandying words with such as you. You have no right either to show or withhold favors. I would scorn to take quarter of you, I say again; so cease your prating and give me but one moment to say good-by to my love, to my life."

Then he turned toward his sweetheart, and, looking well into her eyes, said (so prodigious an affection in his voice that I marveled that these men could refrain from weeping), "Listen, my Dorothy! I love you so entirely that I could not live dishonored in your eyes. Sweetheart, if they killed me, or exiled me from your dear presence, what difference would it be? Dear heart, I know an easier way. Kiss me but once before you lift your dear eyes from mine, and I'll take heaven itself with me in that dear kiss."

I know not whether she did not guess his intent, or whether her senses were so dulled by this great and unexpected misery that she could not realize his meaning; but she raised her sweet mouth to his in so docile and heartrending a manner that I could have wept for anguish. He held her only a moment and kissed her but once; then she fell prone to the earth as he released her from his grasp.

Andrew Elton sprang forward to raise her, and as he did so I saw the flash of the sword Sir Ralph had scorned to yield. But for one instant the bright steel cleft the air; then—there seemed naught but a confused mass—and Sir Ralph lay on the green moss, his beautiful bright blood staining it as it oozed from his gashed side. So great a fear oppressed the others that they never moved, till one, bolder than the rest, stepped forward and, seeing that the knight still breathed, thrust his sword into him unto the hilt, then drawing out the stained blade called out with loud and blustering voice: "So perish all the enemies of our land!" yet there was found no voice to say "Amen!"

Right reverently did they lift the lady from the ground, and reverently did they raise the dead man upon a horse and set him fast thereto. Then they wended their way slowly from the forest; slowly, I say, but when they had gone and night had come, I marveled that so great a tragedy should have been enacted in so short a time. Surely, there was no sadder tree in the forest than I, for these two had become part of my life. I loved them, and 'twas so difficult to realize that now all was over, that those two tender hearts would never more know the same hopes, the same fears, that these two lovers were divided forever.

'Twas the wind that brought me the last news of her. One day it crept wailing over the moorland, and I shivered from fear of the evil he might have to tell me, and then I gathered heart of grace and asked, "What ails thee, old friend?" He made answer saying, "'Twas yesterday she died," and then sped on blustering as if to hide his grief.

But I rejoiced greatly, seeing that I knew how perfect was her love, and how empty of all good her life must prove without him. Therefore was I not disconsolate, but praised her Lord that man's life endureth but so short a time here below, while his after-life lasts forever. For, in truth, man is not like a tree which is felled and dies; yet was I oftentimes sad for the fate of these two, who had trusted me so greatly and whose ending was so sad.

And this is the tale that I narrate to my young branches, when they grow clamorous and bid me tell them stories of humankind. And if aught displeases you in it, I pray you pardon me, seeing that I am not as other story-tellers, and have but tried to while away an hour. Therefore, for my many faults I crave your most gentle indulgence.—Macmillan's Magazine.

THE CHRISTMAS CHIMES.

"'Tis midnight's holy hour—and silence now
Is brooding like a gentle spirit o'er
The still and pulseless world"—

1. But hark! upon the air what bells are are pealing?
And through the silent streets what echoes stealing?
To wake the sleeper to a conscious feeling.
'Tis Christmas morn, with all its blithesome cheer:
Christ's day—the happiest of the livelong year,
Christ's day—triumphant love defeating fear!
Ah! the countless stars of heaven sparkle when
This hour draws near, and angels cry again:
"Glory to God—on earth peace, good will toward men."
And now I hear them pass my silent doors—
The merry carolers—by twos and fours,
Singing the same sweet song which swells and soars
Until their notes with other singers blend,
While heavenward the chorus doth ascend.
"And every knee before Thy throne shall bend."
Yet, hear the bells, how heartily they ring!
How joyously and happily they sing,
"The Christ is born—Hail, hail your king!"

TRUTH.

2. Clear ring the bells of fearless Truth;
As if their tongues would call, forsooth,
"'I am the Way, the Truth, the Life!'
What! think ye, in your worldly strife,
That policy will make a way
Where principle's effulgent ray
Should shed abroad its flashing light,
Nor cease to guide the pilgrim right?"

JUSTICE.

3. The brazen bells, deep-toned and loud,
Through foggy mist and stormy cloud,
Call for the steward to report;
To s and before his Judge in court;
To there hand in the Lord's amount,
And certify to his account;
But should he trembling, fainting fail,
Blind Justice drops him from her scale.

MERCY.

4. Thank God! the bells of Mercy ring;
"O sinner! hold! to thee we bring
Salvation free—for Christ is born;
This is his glorious birthday morn!
He's knocking at your door to-day,
And will ye sullen turn away?"
Ring out! ye bells of Mercy ring!
Immanuel, Savior, Lord and King!

FAITH.

5. The bells of Faith strike clear and strong;
There's not a note among them wrong!
"The evidence of things unseen"
Has left a path forever green;
A road o'er which our fathers trod,
And proved, by words, their faith in God.
Now all with thankful hearts may sing,
"Simply to Thy cross I cling."

HOPE.

6. The bells of Hope, with anchor crest,
Are by each doubting sinner blest;
Their cheering tones to many ears
Allay the pain of puzzling fears;
But as each bell in turn is rung
It points above to where are hung
The bells of faith:—"O sinner! there
The publican smote his breast in prayer!"

CHARITY.

7. The silver bells of Charity—
O bells of greatest rarity!
Of sisters three thou art the chief;
To Pain and Sorrow, Death and Grief,
A welcome friend: thy voice is sweet,
And cheers our homeward erring feet;
While angels cry, with one accord,
"Well done! Thou faithful of the Lord!"

ALL THE BELLS.

8. "Go in! Go in! Go in!
Go search thy heart to-day,
And in thy closet dim
Pray to the babe that lay
In the manger, by the beast,
In the star-lit, golden East.

9. Go out! Go out! Go out!
Go find the poor to-day;
With light hearts search about—
Tell them of the babe that lay
In the manger, by the beast,
In the star-lit golden East.

10. Go up! Go up! Go up!
Go, deck the Christmas tree!
Think how he drained the cup,
Think how he died for thee,
Think of the babe that lay
In the manger, by the beast,
In the star-lit golden East.

11. Go down! Go down! Go down!
Search for the vile to-day;
Seek the prisoners of the town
Tell them of the babe that lay
In the manger, by the beast,
In the star-lit golden East."

Where'er you are, what'er you do,
The Christmas Chimes ring out for you.
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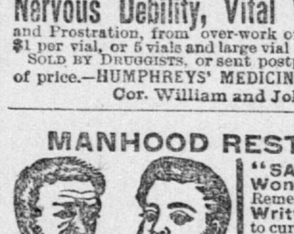
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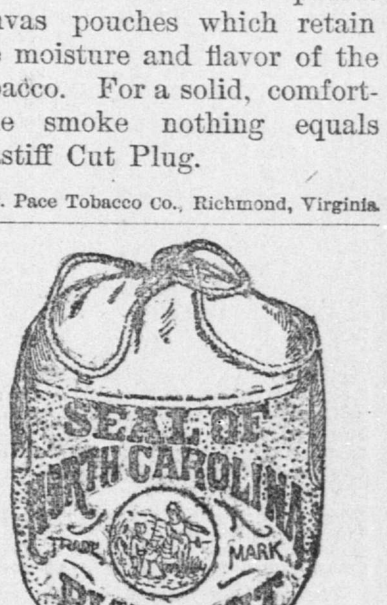

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