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THE MISTAKEN LETTER

CHAPTER III.

"And find something better. I don't know just what it is, but I know that you have it. I knew that when I first saw you with Miss Dwight. It was on the cars as I came here. Her brightness was like—"

"She stopped, flushing painfully. "Would you mind telling me what you were going to say?" he asked in a quiet way.

"It was like the sunshine that comes after a storm. The sunshine that falls upon many a wreck and ruin, but is warm and sweet all the same. I can't tell you why I felt this." Her voice trembled a little. She felt afraid.

"It was a little queer that you should. But isn't it a good thing that the sun can shine for us after a storm?" He laughed, tossing back his fair hair. "It's a grand thing to be glad and happy in spite of the storm that wrecked one's fondest hopes, little girl. But how grave we have grown!" She wondered if she had offended him.

"I must learn to speak more thoughtfully," she said, her eyes upon the floor.

"We shall all be sorry when you have mastered that lesson," he said.

She laughed softly and left him. Miss Dwight had called and had sent for her.

"This is my charity day, Miss Brown, and I called to ask if you would make it endurable by going the round with me."

"Oh, you know I visit the hospital to-day and distribute flowers and books to a lot of people who are too sick or too stupid to care for them. Still one has to do it, of course. If you have't been in night interest you, and it would be actual charity to me."

She laughed in her pretty way Polly always enjoyed everything beautiful.

"Aunt Ruth will decide. I thank you, but I do not know her plans of the day," said Polly, flushing a little.

"By all means, child, go, if you want to. And carry some flowers. Is anything else needed to-day, Eloise?"

"I'm sure I haven't an idea, dear Miss Ruth. I think that like the daughters of horse leech they cry always for 'more,' but dare say with the flowers we shall do."

"And may I add a bottle of Ruthie's best scuppernon wine to the flower? Good morning, Eloise. Yes, there is a man who needs just that particular wine, Ruthie. I want to ask you for it; and I am just going over, so I shall see you both there," and Dr. Berkly gathered up some papers and left them.

The hospital was a small one kept by the town. The doctors gave free service and the ladies formed a society and appointed visiting and other committees.

There were only two wards. One for men and one for women and children. Sometimes these were crowded.

Polly's face paled as she entered the place. The sight of suffering gave her pain and she could not forget herself in thinking of others. Her heart was full of simple pity. The pity that would have the pain taken away. It was not in her nature to feel the deep sympathy that in utter self forgetfulness actually bears the anguish with the sufferer.

She looked about her with wide, frightened eyes, while her careless companion scattered smiles and flowers and tracts, promiscuously.

Miss Dwight had never suffered, and she took it for granted that some people must be sick and others well just as some were short and others tall. She felt sorry, in a general sort of way, that this was so.

They were half through the first ward when Dr. Berkly came in.

Polly saw him bend over the cot of a grey haired, withered old wo-

man and gently lay his hand on her forehead.

She was near enough to hear all he said, though he had not noticed her.

"Are you feeling better to-day?" he asked, kindly.

"Better! Well, not quite so bad, may be, but bad enough. My boy, I hope you may never be old and poor and sick and friendless."

"None of us are quite so bad as that, you know. There is only one way to be friendless. Indeed I'm not sure that there is any way at all," he said smiling.

Polly almost held her breath as she saw the smile that lighted his face.

"I know what you mean, my boy."

"Of course you do."

Polly watched him as he went from cot to cot. Each patient interested him in a different way. She could see that his whole soul was in the work. And not only as the physician is interested in his patients—the man of science working out the difficult problems—stating the secrets of nature, but as brother is interested in brother.

She found herself repeating 'And his neighbor as himself.' She could not understand it, she could only wonder and admire.

After while he came to her. "You brought the wine? Thank you. Presently you shall see the man who needs it so terribly. He was hurt in an accident. He is a preacher of some sort, and he has a whole mountain of creeds and doctrine between himself and the Father. But then it doesn't matter in the long run, and he really seems to take a sort of comfort in it."

He laughed a little as he lifted a baby out of its bed.

"This little fellow begins to know me, Harold, though a family man, cannot touch it. He belongs here, the baby you know. His mother died. We don't know his name, but it is easy work finding one, and 'what's in a name?' There, little man, you are getting on." He put the baby down tenderly, and they went into the other ward.

Miss Dwight, in her hurry to finish the unpleasant work had preceded them. She was scattering flowers over the bed nearest them, and as they drew nearer she smiled down at the occupant and held out a tract.

"It is the preacher," Dr. Berkly said laughing. "And I should not wonder if the tract is from the 'sinner' package. They persist in sending them, you know, and seem to enjoy it. It is easy getting the worst ones away afterward."

Miss Dwight moved on.

The man on the flower strewn cot lay quite still, his hands folded and his eyes closed. Polly could see that his face was thin and solemn and that his fingers were stiff and freckled. Some instinct caused her to stop, her eyes on the pale face.

Dr. Berkly sat down beside him and took one of the freckled hands. The eyes opened at once.

With a low cry Polly drew back.

Dr. Berkly looked up at her, and then quietly went to her. She was trembling violently and her face was white as death.

"Never mind," he said. "It has been too much for you. You must get in my carriage and go home at once. Miss Dwight can return alone. He beckoned to a nurse.

"But you?"

"I shall be all right. Go down now, with Miss Swinson, and let me find you better when I get home. The place won't seem like home to me unless I find you there bright and well."

"I am so sorry, but I—I mean, I can't help it." She faltered.

"Yes, I know. You are not to blame yourself. It isn't your fault. It is only natural that a little thing like you should shrink from pain. Nobody blames you because your muscles are too delicate for lifting heavy weights, and your nerves—"

"No," she interrupted, her sweet face turned from him, "it isn't that. I must not let you think so. It is the old trouble—a scrap from the old life. The world is a tiny place, Dr. Berkly, and one can never really break off from the past. I am so afraid of offending Aunt Ruth. When I used to know him."

"Poor child. I think Ruthie has set you a hard task, little one. May I talk to her about it?"

"Oh, will you do that? Would you dare?"

"I would do anything for you." She looked up into his eyes, and a great wave of unspoken joy swept across her soul.

And then he was saying in his usual way:

"Miss Swinson is ready now."

"I am better now, and if you please I prefer walking home. Miss Swinson will you say as much to Miss Dwight?"

She was so white and small and frail as she stood there before them.

"No, you will go in my carriage. I'll take you myself," Dr. Berkly said, and together they went down.

"I shall be so glad if aunt Ruth can be a little—," she began and stopped, hardly knowing what it was she wanted to say.

"Yes, I know," he said, buttoning down a loose curtain of the carriage. "I understand."

"It is not the same as if he had not died, and it was so long ago—so far in the past," she said in a low voice.

He was standing beside her, and she saw his face light up with a sudden glow.

Wondering at this she sat silently looking at him, and then he stepped back and the carriage whirled away.

She leaned back and drew a long breath of almost perfect happiness—how beautiful the world was—how glorious a thing it was to live.

The carriage stopped under the beautiful gold and crimson maples that lined the streets in front of the house, and she got out and walked up the path between the rows of feathery chrysanthemums.

It was in June that she had come, and now it was the beginning of November.

Leaning against one of the great white pillars of the veranda she saw a forlorn drooping figure. As she drew nearer she saw that it was a woman. She walked faster.

"Was there something that you wanted?" Polly asked, for the woman seemed to be turning away.

She lifted her face and looked at the girl.

"Yes, but it's no use. Somehow my courage didn't hold out, or my pride flamed up just at the last."

"Have you been inside?"

"No. That is just it. I couldn't ask admittance."

"Did you want to see the Doctor? I'm sorry he is not here. Are you sick?"

"Yes I'm sick, but it was not the Doctor I came to see. I wanted to see Miss Bascom."

"And were you refused?"

"I didn't even ring the bell."

"Then come in with me. Miss Bascom will see you. She is gentle and good. You need not be afraid of her." Polly's voice was full of pity.

"You are sorry for me—you pity me!"

"Yes, and she will. Come with me."

Polly opened the door and the woman followed her in. She led the way to a small room at the side of the hall.

"I don't know what you want," said Polly.

"I wrote to her six months ago and asked her to help me. It was hard to do, for I knew the Bascom pride. I have it myself, and she did not answer my letter. Now I have come to her. You go and tell her. Beg her to let me stay. Tell her I am poor and homeless. But I am a Bascom too, and if she says no, if she sends you back to tell me that, I will go away and die, for I shall never approach her again, never. She has known of my terrible need. If she turns me off now, I will never return. Go and tell her so."

"But who are you? What am I to say?" Polly looked at her with great, wondering eyes, half afraid of the terrible passion in her white, suffering face.

"Who am I? Ah, who. I was a vain, pleasure-loving woman. I did what thousands of others do. I married a low, common man for the sake of his handsome face! A love marriage, forsooth! And my heart—they will live on. But you need not know the story. I am a divorced wife! A woman cast off. But I am a Bascom, the daughter of Miss Bascom's own sister, Alice Brown. Have you never heard of me? The one black sheep in the spotless flock. I am Mary Brown, now that I have taken my own name. She will know."

The woman stopped short. Polly had fallen weak and white to the floor.

"There, you are going to faint at the very sound of my name. You can't breathe the same air with me."

"No, I shall not faint," Polly said, struggling to her feet and sinking back upon the sofa.

"And you are Mary Brown. Miss Bascom's niece." She leaned forward and looked with great, miserable eyes at the woman before her. "Yes, I am that awful creature. The woman who made a grave mistake, and who has suffered for it. Did it ever occur to you that I might have been more sinned against than sinning?"

"I—I never heard of it—I—," the woman laughed.

"Certainly not. I ought to have known that much. But you go now to Miss Bascom. Tell her what I have told you. I shall never trouble her again. Close the door. I shall rest and wait. You may have to plead long."

Polly staggered out, closing the door behind her.

She crept up to her room, and sat down. She understood it all now. Miss Bascom had written to her niece—the woman down stairs—the letter went astray and came to her.

The girl's face was white and hard as she sat there thinking it all out. They had believed her to be a divorced wife, a reckless, pleasure-loving woman, and this was very awful in Miss Bascom's sight. Polly could understand that.

And now she must let them know! Must she give it all up—the beautiful life that she loved—the friends who were so dear to her?

She got up and walked about the room, touching the various articles that made it pretty and home like, as a mother touches the garments of her dear child.

"I can't do it, oh, I can't! They love me, so, and I am so happy here. How can I go away?"

She threw herself upon the bed in the agony of weeping.

And then the tempest came.

Why not go down and send this poor woman away? It would be better for Miss Bascom—better for herself. She could give the woman money—her purse was always well filled.

She sat up, the light of hope in her eyes.

"I could send her money as she needs it. That is what she wants. No one would ever know, and I could live here and be happy. How can I bear to let him know that I have been an—Oh, I can not do it. He would hate me

and scorn me, I can't, I can't. I must send her away. No one will ever know."

She got up and bathed her face, and then went quietly down the stairs. She hesitated for a moment as she reached the hall and while she stood there the front door opened and Dr. Berkly entered. He came toward her, smiling.

"I'm afraid you are not looking much better," he said. "You must leave the hospital to the regular committee. I can't have you like this again."

Polly's heart sent a warm flood to her face. She forgot everything, in her great joy. The look in his eyes—the tone of his voice—even the simple words told the wondrous story.

"But I must hurry on. I stopped to see you. Won't you go to sleep now? I ran up with Ruthie down town. She was going to see a friend who has just arrived from somewhere, and I shall not be back until after dark. And then for awhile I intend to forget all my sick people. Where shall I find you, little girl?"

There was no mistaking him now.

"I—I," she lifted her shy, happy eyes to his face, and then she remembered, and stopped.

"You mean that I must look for you. I think I shall know where you are. Ah, little girl, how glad I am that you came to us."

He went away then and left her, and she stood quite still in the beautiful hall after he had gone. Suppose he had known the secret that lay hidden behind that closed door? Suppose he knew.

A sudden tremor passed over her.

"How he would despise me. I should be unworthy then—if I did this thing. But how can I explain? At least I can do right. That is what he would do."

She crept upstairs again and took off the pretty gown she wore, replacing it with the suit she had worn on that summer night that seemed to have gone so far away into the past.

She packed a little traveling bag and took part of the money from her purse.

Then she looked about her with wide, dry eyes, and left the room. The woman was waiting patiently.

"I can see that her answer was no," she said wearily.

"You are mistaken. I have not seen Miss Bascom. She has gone out. But I know that she will welcome you. If you leave the door open you can see her when she comes in."

That was all she could say. She left the room, and let herself out of the house.

At the gate the maple leaves showered down upon her. Without looking back she went on down the street.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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