

The Return

The dark clouds hanging low over the settlement of Selby conveyed a spirit of gloominess to all around. The Mansion of Colonel Carton, situated a little distance from the village, was also gloomy and dismal in appearance. Colonel Carton, the wealthiest man of the village, was little liked by his neighbors nor was he desirous of their friendship. At present he seemed involved in a perplexing problem. He sat at his desk brooding a while, then starting up he called the servant and ordered the carriage.

As the carriage rolled away down the road, Carton settled himself easily in the seat muttering to himself: "I will ask her. If she refuses, out she will go; if she accepts—she will be lucky."

He was occupied with this thought when the carriage came to a stop before a plain looking cottage. The Colonel jumped out and walked to the front door. His knock was answered by a short white-haired woman whose youthful beauty had long since been changed by cares and troubles into the sad and kindly beauty of a mother.

Mrs. Newman, for this was she, had indeed borne numerous crosses during life but in all her trials had trusted to the infinite mercy of God. Her husband had died six years before, leaving two children, one a boy, Harry of eighteen, wayward and headstrong, and a daughter Mary in whom the mother hoped that the virtues lost in her son would bloom forth. And she was not deceived; for while Harry grew more wayward every day, finally running away, Mary grew up to be a beautiful and virtuous girl, the pride of her mother's heart.

On the death of Mr. Newman, a heavy mortgage on the property held by Colonel Carton remained unpaid and

all her combined efforts with those of her daughter were of no avail as she could not meet the note which fell due on the morrow.

But soon the shadow of another trouble hovered over them. It was whispered about the village that Colonel Carton had fallen in love with Mary, although he was twice her age. Mary had indeed of late been receiving attentions from him, but she either refused them altogether or reluctantly accepted them; for she despised this selfish, mean, and haughty man. He understood her thoughts, but was still the more resolved to marry her. It was for that, on this morning, despairing of obtaining his end by fair means he had decided to resort to other methods.

"Good-day ma'anm", said the Colonel.

"Good day Colonel," she replied, "won't you come in"

She ushered him into the little parlor which was plain but spotlessly clean. He took a chair near the door, and nervously fumbling his hat he began:

"Er—you are aware that there is a mortgage on this property which falls due tomorrow." Hesitating a moment he continued: "As I am urgently in need of funds just at present I am inclined to demand payment, but out of regard for your age and—er—my affection for your daughter, I have decided to cancel the mortgage upon one condition, only that I should have your daughter's hand in marriage. You then may have full and free possession of this property, while I shall make your daughter happy in my home. If this condition is not fulfilled I shall be compelled to foreclose the mortgage. What do you say?"

Mrs. Newman her eyes wide with surprise and horror at this sudden intelligence, slowly replied.

"You mean—that—I shall sacrifice my daughter for

the mortgage? That I shall marry my own daughter to a man whom I have great reason to know she loathes?"

"It is not a sacrifice madam; it is indeed a favor. As regards your daughter's inclination towards me, I guess she will learn to like me after a time. I can give her priceless jewels, money, luxury, comfort—all that any girl can desire. What more can she want?"

"Oh no" said she, "if my daughter does not care for you now she never shall. A woman does not love a man for his possessions, but for a return of love. This love I do not believe you can give her, but to be fair with her I'll leave her to choose for herself."

"Where is she," he asked.

"She has just gone down the lane for a walk; I shall call her," and Mrs. Newman left the room to find Mary.

The Colonel waited patiently for a few minutes until his patience was rewarded by the arrival of Mrs. Newman accompanied by her daughter. One look at the countenance of the latter at once told him that she had already been informed of the purpose of his visit. However, he repeated his proposal to her.

She stood before him, her hands clasped, her eyes resting upon the floor, then she slowly answered.

"Oh, how can you—how can I accept—your proposal when you know I do not love you?"

"But you will come to love me in time," he said.

"Oh no, I can never love you,—I would sooner die than be your wife."

"Then my proposal is refused," said the Colonel, with eyes kindling.

"You see," added the mother, "that she does not wish to marry you."

The Colonel rose and in a lofty voice said:

"Then perhaps when she sees her dearly loved mother homeless on the road she will rue her decision." He then strode majestically from the room.

There was no sleep at the Newman cottage that night. Mary lay for hours sleeplessly and restlessly tossing about, while the battle of conscience raged within her; the hatred of Colonel Carton ranged upon one side, and the love of her mother ranged against it. The struggle was long and fierce; but at last the nobler part became stronger, and she resolved that for the sake of her dear mother, she would sacrifice her happiness, her home and her honor. The Eastern sky was slightly tinged with the gray of dawn before she sank into a broken and troubled sleep.

The bright sun climbing above the trees on the following morning flashed against the windshield of an automobile several miles from Selby and heading towards it. The solitary occupant was well dressed and seemed to look forward with eagerness to the end of his journey.

A few hours later the big car rolled up to the Newman cottage and stopped. The man alighted and ran up to the door. He paused a moment before he entered. Proceeding towards the kitchen he was met by Mrs. Newman, who greeted him with a troubled and surprised look then he held out his arms towards her and smiled. Mrs. Newman was in doubt no longer.

"Harry, my long lost son," she said, embracing him tenderly.

When he had disengaged himself, noticing the disordered house he asked her what it all meant; whereupon she told him the whole story. He listened in silence till she had finished, then he rose suddenly and said:

"Where is Mary?"

"She went out a few minutes ago; I think she has gone

to see Colonel Carton," answered his mother.

"I am going to look for her mother, so don't worry, everything will be all right."

A short way down the road he found her dejectedly making her way towards the mansion of Colonel Carton. As she stepped aside to let the car pass, he stopped, alighted, and advanced towards her.

"Mary, don't you know me?" he asked.

She stood a moment in surprise and astonishment. It was her brother Harry. Overcome by the intensity of her feelings, she buried her head on his shoulder and burst into tears. He slowly lifted her head and kissed her.

"It is alright Mary," he said, "don't cry."

Lifting her into the car, he jumped in after her. After conversing in low tones for a few minutes he started the car and drove on to Colonel Carton's.

We may judge the Colonel's surprise when he saw the car stop before the house and Miss Newman and a strange gentleman alight from it. He had been expecting a visit from her that morning, but did not expect anyone to come with her. While he was wondering who the stranger could be the servant appeared, announcing their arrival.

He descended to the parlor, where his visitors awaited him. Mary was calm and quiet, while her brother wore a grim smile on his countenance. There was an embarrassing silence for a few minutes. Then Mary spoke.

"We have been thinking over your proposal Col Carton, and I would not like to see my dear mother homeless on the street,"—here the Colonel's face broadened into an exulting smile while he murmured, "Ah—you have become reasonable,"—

"Yes," she continued, "since we cannot bear to be turned out on the street, we have decided to pay the mortgage."

If a bomb had suddenly exploded before him, the Colonel could not have been more surprised. This was an obstacle on which he had never figured. However, with an effort he controlled himself and said:

"It is all very well to speak about paying the mortgage but I demand payment today."

"Before I continue," she replied, "allow me to introduce my brother Harry, who just arrived this morning and who is in a position to cancel the mortgage."

Carton looked at Harry in speechless wrath then said:

"Snce you have the money I ask payment at once."

"Don't be in such a hurry said," Harry, "the time does not expire until noon; however I suppose we may as well straighten out his little matter at once. Would you be so kind as to pass me the mortgage." "I think you will find the right amount here," he said, as he handed Carton the money.

Reluctantly the Colonel passed the mortgage to Harry realizing that his carefully laid plan was frustrated.

With a cheerful "good-bye" Mary and Harry departed for home feeling that the heavy burden had at last been lifted.

That night, at the Newman cottage, as Harry sat before the hearth in silence, watching the beautiful countenance of his mother who had fallen asleep in the old rocker beside him, he seemed again to hear that pious supplication which had always been their guide:

"Comforter of the afflicted pray for us."

J. H. Fitzgerald '25
