

## The Fireside.

### WITH MALICE AFORETHOUGHT.

BY REV. J. MERVIN HALL.

"We might just as well be ruined entirely, so far as my plans and hopes are concerned. I shall be crazy if I sit here thinking, thinking any longer." And Helen Kirk started up, put on her hat, and thrust the hat pin savagely through it as she stood for a moment before the glass.

"I don't wonder there is a deep furrow in your forehead," she said to her reflection in the glass. "And it never will be smoothed out again as long as you live."

Helen went out into the warm sunshine and breathed the vibrating air, balmy with all the odors of spring; for the cottage of the Kirks was on the border of the city, where the trees and open fields began. But Helen did not notice these things, nor hear even the hilarious notes of the brown thrasher that sang in the maple tree. The first thing that attracted her attention from her own moody thoughts was the approach of a gentleman coming along the street from the city. He walked with an alert, springing step, as if time were too short for all the work he had to do.

"Oh, dear!" thought Helen, "it is Mr. Markland, and he is the last person I want to meet. He sees everything through those near-sighted glasses of his, and as for his gray hair, it is a trap to catch the unwary."

"Good morning, Miss Helen," spoke the pleasant voice of the minister. "I am glad to see you looking so serene and cheerful, so much in harmony with the loveliness of the morning."

"Mr. Markland, I know I don't look serene and cheerful," and if the morning is lovely, I haven't noticed it yet."

"It must be the glasses," said the minister with conviction, as he took them off and carefully wiped them. Then he went on in that tone that no one ever doubted, and which had opened to him many close-fastened hearts.

"What is it that troubles you, Helen? Perhaps I can help you."

"Well, Mr. Markland, no doubt you know something about father's financial reverses. We are not ruined completely, but—but—"

Helen hesitated. Looking through the glasses into the clear eyes of the little minister, her troubles seemed to dwindle to the size of her own image which she saw there. But she went on:

"First and worst, my musical career is at an end. I was going abroad to study for three years, you know. And now, just when I seemed on the verge of success, I must give it all up, and be one of the crowd, just an ordinary good pianist."

The minister smiled gently. "I can see how great the disappointment is to you," he said, "but it is not easy for me to look at it from your point of view. I am entirely reconciled to the fact of your remaining in Roselea, and I can think at this very moment of several ways in which an 'ordinary good pianist' could be made useful. But that is not all."

"No," sighed Helen; "when the trouble came I said that I would be a help and not a burden to them at home. I have always had a great admiration for the work of trained nurses, and I resolved to make that my life work.

But yesterday I went by appointment to the Waverly Hospital and, and—then they would not accept me for training. I am perfectly well, but they said that my physique was not equal to the severe and constant strain of the work, and that especially my nervous sympathetic temperament was against me."

The minister said nothing. He was watching Helen's fingers as they nervously wove themselves together while she spoke.

"And so," concluded Helen, "there is nothing left for me to do except to help at home. Of course I am needed there, and it will save the expense of a maid, but all these things are such a disappointment to me that it sometimes seems as if I couldn't endure it any longer, as if there wasn't a girl in the city whose lot is so hard as mine. There, Mr. Markland, I know you think I am a bundle of selfishness."

The minister took out his watch and looked at it absently. For some reason he did not seem so ready as usual to say the right word to one who sought his advice.

"I hope life will not look quite so dark to you after a while," he said. "I will talk with you again soon. This morning I am unexpectedly called to attend an important committee meeting in Boston, and I must leave at once. I shall have to neglect some of my calls to-day, but there is one I am very anxious about, and I am going to ask you to take my place, if you will. Mildred Lee is a girl of about your own age, but she is an invalid. She lives at 158 Hermon street, quite at the other side of the city. Would you be willing to call there this morning and tell her why I could not come?"

"Why, I hardly know. Yes, I suppose so, if you think I—"

"Thank you, thank you, Helen."

"Good morning, I must hurry to catch my train."

"Well, this is interesting," thought Helen. "I'm a cheerful messenger to be sent to call on an invalid. I'm sure I don't know what I can say. Anyway, I can take a few flowers."

So Helen stopped at a tiny shop where a German kept fresh flowers, and bought some carnations to which the florist added a few sprays of ferns and asparagus. "And vill you veer von pink?" said the old man. "It was a Taybreak—leafy like the sky dis morning."

Helen thanked him and pinned the beautiful flower to her dress, and as she went along the street, she was aware that something had happened to the morning that it was much more lovely than it had been a few minutes before.

She easily found the house on Hermon street and a sweet-faced, middle-aged woman came to the door. It was Mildred's mother, and as Helen had introduced herself and told her errand, Mrs. Lee took her at once to Mildred's room.

As she crossed the threshold, she paused in astonishment at what she saw. Against one side of the room was a bed. It was boarded up at the sides with quartered oak, and along the boards were pockets for holding thread, needles, silks, and all sorts of articles for sewing and embroidery. Along the wall were two book shelves within easy reach, the light came from a large window behind the head of the bed, two swinging stands were at the side of

the bed and a small piano was drawn up at right angles to it. All these things Helen saw, and yet she did not see them; for her gaze was drawn to the little figure upon the bed, the girl whose life was bound by those few feet of space. Her head was lifted upon the white pillows, her pale face, surrounded by wavy brown hair, was too pale and transparent, but her eyes were bright, and the light of perfect peace shone in them. "And thank God her hands are free!" thought Helen.

"Mildred, this is Helen Kirk, who has come to see you," said Mrs. Lee.

Helen tried to collect her thoughts. What should she say. She began to open the box of flowers.

"Mr. Markland had to go to Boston this morning," she began, "and he asked me to come and tell you that he could not call to-day. I thought you might like a few flowers, and so I brought these."

"Oh, how kind you are!" said Mildred, as she reached out her white hands for the flowers. She gathered them in her hands as a mother holds a baby, till the blossoms touched her cheek. A tinge of color fluttered there like the faint blush of the Daybreaks, but a strong contrast with the deep crimson of the darker flowers.

"Oh—how—delicious!" she breathed, as she inhaled their fragrance. "But I must not let them get thirsty. Will you please hand me that vase on the mantel? No, not that one; the tall one with the green tint in it."

She drew one of the swinging stands to her side, and with dainty touches she arranged the flowers with skill.

"Why, you almost make them speak," exclaimed Helen.

It was good to hear Mildred's rippling laugh as she answered:

"Oh, but they do speak, all of them, and these that you have will speak to me of the new friend that Mr. Markland has sent to me. Hasn't he the strangest ways of doing lovely things? How do you suppose he treats me? I haven't moved from my place, you know, for twelve years, except Malcolm lifts me. But Mr. Markland comes in like a fresh breeze from the woods and asks me to go to walk with him. And then he will pretend that we are walking through the garden grass and underneath the tall trees, and along the brookside, where the rippling water sings. 'Come,' he will say, 'I see some great white trilliums in that leafy hollow yonder; let's go and get them. And here, at the foot of this grand old pine, is the last bunch of arbutus; is there any perfume so sweet? And look, quick! There goes a scarlet tanager!' Until it seems to me that I can see and hear all the loveliness of the fields and woods."

The tears were shining in Helen's eyes. "Twelve years," she said, "twelve long years!"

"But just see how the mountain has come to Mahomet," said Mildred. "Everything within reach; and here is even an electric bell to call mother. No real need of it, you know, but my brother Malcolm has to be doing something with electricity all the time. He is an expert electrical engineer, and now he has the whole charge of constructing the new street railway from Bethlehem to Lebanon; I'm so proud of his success. And then here is the piano, and sometimes I can reach over and strike a few chords, enough to get the theme sonata or symphony. But this morning I am just going to have a feast while I listen to you."

"To me?" exclaimed Helen. "How do you know that I can play?"

"Oh, I knew who you were before

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mother spoke your name, from Malcolm's description of you. You played an accompaniment for him once at the Cecilia Club, when Miss Pownder, the regular pianist, was away."

"Is that Mr. Lee your brother? He is the best tenor in the club, his voice is so wonderfully sweet and clear."

"Indeed it is," said Mildred naively. "And he said," she went on "that he never sang so well as he did when you played for him, because he knew the moment you began to play that you had true musical feeling and expression. He said some other things that I should like to tell you, but perhaps Malcolm would not like it. I'll ask him when he comes home, and then—"

"Don't you dare to!" said Helen, with a blush as she took her seat at the piano. "Now, listen." And beginning with some popular light melodies, she played on through marches, rondos, arias, and waltzes until she began to

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