

The Fireside.

A KENTUCKY GIRL.

Life to the Demmings took on a new meaning when Joe brought his wife home. None of the family had ever seen her. They knew she was one of the Austruthers of Kentucky.

"There are Austruthers in our church in that State," said Grace. "I hope Mary belongs to our membership."

"O, yes, certainly!" said Joe, eagerly. He was just starting to be married and he was anxious that they should all love Polly in advance.

"Does she sing in the choir?" asked Isabella.

"I think not. But she has one of the sweetest voices—a low contralto. And you ought to hear her laugh, Belle. The merriest ring!"

The girls smiled. They were fond of Joe, and ready to welcome his wife.

"But I hope she is ready to take a leading part in the church," said Grace, after he had gone. "Joe will fill father's place some day, and his description of her does not give me the idea of an energetic, calladous woman."

Uncle Ben must be kept in his own room when she comes, and Tom can be sent to the country for a month's visit," Grace said, her delicate face flushing painfully.

There were two skeletons in the Demming household. The Squire's brother, Ben, who was a paralytic old soldier, and a most cross-grained, profane old fellow, occupied one wing of the mansion. He had a man to nurse and read to him, for his oaths were intolerable to his nieces. Tom was their brother, younger than Joe. Tom Demming had disappeared for three years after he left college, and had come back a haggard, dissipated loafer.

Nobody in Ball's Ferry knew just what he had done in that gap of time, but all were certain that he was under ban. The family treated him with gloomy patience. They had taken up their crosses and bore it; but it was heavy, and he knew it. Tom was never seen by visitors, at the table, or in the parlor. At dusk he would skulk out to join some of his comrades at the village grog shops, and occasionally, but not often, was brought home brutally intoxicated.

Joe's wife disappointed them all. She was a plump, merry little girl; nothing more.

"A very pleasant little heathen," sighed Grace, after two days had passed. "I named some of the best books of religious fiction, but she never heard of them; and she did not know a single word of our foreign missionaries."

Good Mrs. Demming was uneasy at this, and that very evening turned the conversation on doctrinal subjects. Polly grew red.

"I am afraid," she said, "I am not clear in my ideas concerning these different points. The truth is, after mother's death I had the charge of my four brothers, and I had so little time."

"You will have more time now," said Isabella. "I will mark out a course of reading for you."

But Mary made slow progress with her course of reading. As time passed

and she settled down into her place in the family, she proved to be a very busy little woman. She had a positive talent for finding work; took her part of the family mending, tossed up dainty little desserts, helped Joe with his accounts. When Joe had gone to his office she took tremendous walks, advised Mother Demming about her fancy work, or copied the Squire's papers for him.

"What a clerky hand you write!" said Grace, one day. "I often wish mine were not so delicate, when father worries over those papers. But as for mother's embroidery, women of her age ought to give up that useless work when their eyes are failing."

"It does not seem useless to me," said Polly, gently. "She thinks you all value it."

"Where can Mary go on those interminable walks?" said Isabella, one morning, to her father. "You should warn her about Black Lane. She might wander into it and bring home typhoid fever."

"You ought to report the lane as a nuisance, father," said his wife. "It is a perfect sink of filth and vice."

"It is a disgrace to Ball's Ferry that such wretches can find harbor in it," added Isabella. "They ought to be driven beyond the borough limits."

"Well, well, my dear! It doesn't do to be too energetic," said the Squire. "They never had a chance."

He was aroused, however, to mention Black Lane at a meeting of the town burgesses that day.

"Something ought to be done, or we shall have typhus among us," said he.

"Something has been done," said Judge Paule. "I came through the lane this morning, and I hardly knew it. There has been a general draining and cleaning; the cabins are whitewashed, and the women, some of them, have actually washed their faces."

"What has happened?" asked the Squire.

"I heard the sound of children's voices singing in one of the cabins, and the men told me that it was Miss Mary's class. Some good women has been at work, I suspect."

"Miss Mary?"—the Squire's face grew red, his eyes flashed, but he said nothing more.

Going home, he met Polly coming to meet him. He looked at her with the eye of a judge.

"Are you the good Samaritan?" Have you been in Black Lane, my dear?"

She blushed, laughed and stammered.

"Oh, that was the most natural thing in the world, father. You know I was brought up among colored people; I know how to deal with them. It was only a ditch cut here and there, a few panes of glass and some bushels of lime."

The matter was driven from the Squire's mind before he reached the house, for he saw Tom skulking around the stable door. He had returned that day, and a dull weight of misery fell, at the sight, on his father's heart. Tom did not enter the house until late in the evening, when the family were gathered about the table.

"I came to see Joe's wife. Unless he's ashamed to introduce his scapegrace brother,"

"Mary is not here," said Mother Demming. "Where is she, Grace?"

"In Uncle Ben's room. She reads the New York paper to him every day now. I heard his laughing, and probably swearing louder than ever, so he must be pleased. I wonder she can stand it."

"It's hard to understand her," said Isabella, dryly. "Mary is not as careful of her associations as she should be."

Tom had been listening eagerly. "Enough said!" he broke out, with a thump of his fist on the table. "If Joe's wife can take thought of that lonely man up there, there's better stuff in her than I expected. I'll go up and make her acquaintance."

Several times afterwards Tom's voice was heard joining in the jokes and laughter that came out of Uncle Ben's room.

"Mary seems to have enhanced them both," said Grace.

"Tom is clean and shaved to-day, and looks like a human being," said Joe.

But even he was startled when Mary came down that evening for a walk, and, nodding brightly to Tom, asked him to go with her.

"Finish your book, Joe; Tom will be my escort."

Tom followed her slouchingly to the gate. He stopped there. Shame, defiance, misery, looked out of his eyes.

"See here, Mrs. Demming, I reckon you don't know, or you wouldn't have asked me to go with you!"

Polly's tender, steady eyes met him. "Yes, I know."

"D'ye know I'm a thief? I was in jail at Pittsburg for a year."

Polly drew her breath hard. A prayer to God for help went up from her heart in that second of time. She held out both hands.

"Yes, Joe told me. But that is all over now—all over. You have begun new again, Brother Tom. Come."

She put her hand in his arm as they walked down the street. He did not speak to her until they came back. Then he stopped her again at the gate.

"My sisters have never been seen with me in public since I came back. I'll never forget this of you, Mary, never!"

A month later the Squire said to his wife:

"Did you know Mary was going over his mathematics with Tom? Regularly coaching him. That little girl has the clearest head for figuring I ever knew. But what can she be doing it for?"

Mrs. Demming cleared her voice before she could speak.

"She has applied to some of her friends in Kentucky to give Tom a situation. Father, I think there may be a chance for the boy. He wants to begin his life over again among strangers."

"God help him!" muttered the Squire. He surprised Polly when he met her again, by taking her in his arms and kissing her with tears in his eyes.

In the spring Tom went to Kentucky and began his new life. He has not broken down in it.

It was in the spring, too, that Uncle Ben began to fail. The old man was so fond of Polly that she gave up most of her time to him; so much of it, indeed, that Joe complained.

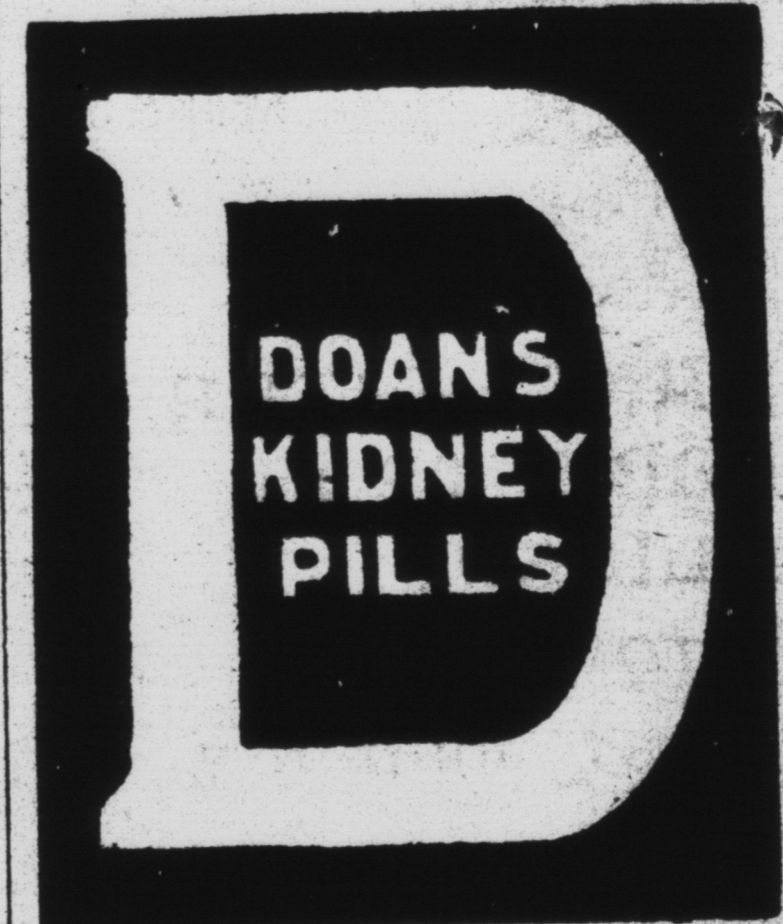
"Don't say a word, dear," she said; "he has such a little while to stay. Let me do what I can."

"I say, Polly, was that the Bible you were reading to him to-day?"

"Yes; he asks for it often."

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Joe began to whistle, and choked it down with a sigh. Uncle Ben had been such a godless reprobate in his youth that it had never occurred to any of the Demmings that there was any way to reach his soul. He lived until late in the summer. The Sunday before his death he sent for Mr. Floyd, and talked to him for a long time.

When the young minister came out of the dying man's room he was pale. He had been much moved.

"This is surely a case of sincere repentance," he said. "It is Mary's work under God's blessing," he added.

The girls overheard the conversation. They sat gravely silent after the minister was gone.

"I do not understand Polly," said Grace, at last. "She never seemed to me to be a religious person."

"Perhaps," said the Squire, "we have not clearly understood what religion is."
—Christian Observer.

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