

The Fireside.

AT FIFTY-EIGHT.

BY SUSAN HUBBARD MARTIN.

That day Miss Theodosia sat reading in her sunny kitchen. She preferred it to any other room in the house. Now that the children were gone, the others seemed dark and desolate, and after all, habits of a lifetime are hard to break. It was in the kitchen that most of her life had been spent. There had been no time to cultivate the gentler and more pleasing arts. The stern realities of a hard life had thrust all that aside. In the years of meal-getting and dishwashing, in the periods of nursing and sewing and patching, Miss Theodosia had learned to stifle her ambitions. The mother of the family had died when she had only passed seventeen, the father a year later, so upon her shoulders had fallen the task of rearing seven little brothers and sisters, four boys and three girls. She had performed it well and nobly, but a long life of servitude had left its traces. Difficult and shy by nature, she had early learned to efface herself, to let others take the pleasant things, herself the hard ones. Her family did not mean to be selfish, but they were. "Theodosia didn't care for things," they would tell each other. "Theodosia didn't need much," and so in their own plan of happiness and independence, the elder sister was left out. And yet in her youth Theodosia had dreamed great dreams. Miss Theodosia was now small and bent and wistful-eyed, but the time had been when she was as slender as a sapling, with fearless eyes and a sweet, laughing face. She used to sigh, now that she was fifty-eight, at the picture she had made at seventeen. It had been her dream, too, even since she had been a little toddling child, to be a great musician. She loved music. She breathed it in with every breath she drew, for she had an ear attuned to plaintive chords and sweetest melodies.

"Sometime I'll have a piano," she would whisper to herself as she went about her work. "If I could only touch the keys I could better talk to God. I can't sing, I can't pray aloud, but I'm sure he'd better understand through its music what I've been longing to say all my life and could not; the dreams I've dreamed, the thoughts I've had, the plans broken and the hopes thwarted, the services I would have rendered if I could. All the sins of omission and commission I'm guilty of, I could tell him, and he would know it through the melody."

But the piano had never come into her narrow life. When the children had married and gone, only a pittance was left, just enough to keep her from actual want.

A shadow fell across the doorway and Miss Theodosia looked up. It was Mrs. Deacon Hunt, one of her neighbors. Mrs. Hunt was tall and spare, with eyes somewhat cold and severe. She bustled in without ceremony, arrayed in her best black dress.

"Well Theodosia," she began, "I've news for you."

Miss Theodosia smiled. "Have you?" she answered. "I hope it's good news. Take this chair. You'll excuse the kitchen. I'm sewing in here today."

Mrs. Hunt sat down. "You've had

a legacy, Theodosia," she said solemnly.

Miss Theodosia looked a little startled. "A legacy?" she replied.

"Yes," said Mrs. Hunt, "a legacy. Mrs. General Page has left you her piano. The deacon heard the will read. I've just come from town and he told me to tell you. It's true enough, you may be sure of that. Are you surprised?"

Miss Theodosia drew a long, awe-struck breath. "Surprised?" she cried, "why, I never dreamed of such a thing. I didn't know that Mrs. Page thought that much of me."

"She seems to have done so," replied Mrs. Hunt dryly. "None of her other friends got a thing except Lucinda Hayes. She left to her her camel's hair shawl. I've the very words that were in the will," she added, "that is about the piano."

She drew a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket and adjusted her glasses. "Because I think she will appreciate it more than any one I know," read Mrs. Hunt slowly, "I give and bequeath to my dear friend Theodosia Hope Latimer, my Steinway piano together with all my music."

Mrs. Hunt put the paper back in her pocket, then she looked keenly at Miss Theodosia. "Well?" she said, "Well?"

Miss Theodosia had risen. One hand grasped tightly the chair back. There was a rapt look on the sweet, worn face. "Mrs. Hunt," she said tremulously, "I've prayed for a piano all my life. How do you suppose she knew it?"

When the piano had been safely set up in the little house, all the children came to see it. There it stood in its beautiful case with its crimson velvet stool and its glistening keys, a splendid contrast to the plain furnishings of the small room.

"Theodosia," said her younger sister, Rachel, a sprightly matron with shrewd grey eyes, "I know what you'll do with this piano. You'll give it to us."

But Miss Theodosia shook her head. "No, Rachel," she said gently, "it was given to me by my dear old friend. After I am gone it may be yours, but not now. I've given you the best years of my life. This is mine."

"But you can't use it," persisted her sister blankly. "It would be a sin to shut it up, and we have children."

"I'm not going to shut it up," answered Miss Theodosia gravely, "and as for the children, they are always welcome. They can use it here." And Rachel, though greatly displeased, had the grace to remain silent.

A day or two after that Mrs. Deacon Hunt dropped heavily into a chair at her neighbor's, Mrs. Sophronia Hughes. "Sophronia," she began as she took out her knitting, "what do you think has happened now?"

Mrs. Hughes smiled. She was a gentle little woman of fifty-five or six, with a sweet faded face. "I'd never guess. What, Sarah?"

"Theodosia Latimer is going to take music lessons," replied Mrs. Hunt. "Isn't that ridiculous, Sophronia? As if a woman of her age could learn anything. Why, I wouldn't think of it, and I'm a year or two younger than she is."

Mrs. Hughes looked at her neighbor with her mild brown eyes. "It isn't ridiculous, Sarah," she answered, gently, "at least I don't view it in that way. You might not undertake it perhaps, but you have a great many things Theodosia hasn't. A husband, good children, a comfortable home and all that. What wouldn't occur to you might to her. Theodosia always had a hard time. She's spent her life for others; sacrificed all her own plans so that those brothers and sisters of hers could be clothed and fed and educated. She's refused more than one good offer of marriage too, in her younger days. She ought to have a little pleasure now, and if she can get it out of that piano, her old friends and neighbors ought to be the last ones to condemn her for it. Poor Theodosia, I always knew she loved music."

Mrs. Hunt looked at her old friend with a gentler expression. "You're right, Sophronia," she said heartily, "I hadn't thought of it in that way."

One afternoon a day or two later a bright-faced girl in a brown suit and hat rang the bell of Miss Theodosia's small house. Miss Theodosia opened it. Her gray hair was brushed smoothly back and she wore a white apron. "Miss Theodosia Latimer, I believe," said the young girl. "You sent for me. I'm Millicent Thorne, the new music teacher."

"Yes," replied Miss Theodosia, "come in, please."

She ushered her into the little room where the piano stood. The young music teacher's eyes brightened when she saw it. "What a beautiful piano," she cried.

"Yes," answered Miss Theodosia, flushing a little, "it is." She looked at the bright, speaking face a trifle wistfully. "Do you like Crown Point?" she added gently.

Millicent Thorne smiled. "So much," she replied. "I've quite a list of pupils, too. That always encourages one. Have you any young people for me, Miss Theodosia?"

Miss Theodosia flushed. "I have a pupil for you," she answered gravely, "myself."

The young music teacher's eyes widened with surprise. Miss Theodosia saw the look, half of astonishment, half of dismay.

"Don't discourage me," she cried. "If you only knew how my heart is set on it. I'm old, I know, but all my life I've wanted to play. I always had the longing to improvise wonderful things on the piano. Now I've given up all that, but I thought with your help, if I studied hard I might learn a few simple songs, hymns, and the like, you know. It seems to me if I could only play 'Rock of Ages' and 'Majestic Sweetness Sits Enthroned,' I'd be the happiest woman in the world. I've wanted to learn always but there was no chance. If circumstances had been different, but I had no choice. There was my duty and I did it. Perhaps in heaven these poor stiff fingers of mine will become straight and slender and supple, and I can play there—and understand, I long to do a little here yet; don't say it is too late."

The young girl bent over and took the little, work-hardened hand in both her firm, white, strong ones. There were tears in her eyes. Unconsciously Miss Theodosia had laid bare her soul, that sensitive, beautiful spirit that for fifty-eight years had been stifled and repressed in her frail little body.

"No," cried Millicent Thorne earnestly, "we won't say it is too late. We'll

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So the lessons began, lessons that to Miss Theodosia were a marvel and a delight, unlocking as they did to her the door of hidden mysteries and countless joys.

Mrs. Deacon Hunt met Mrs. Sophronia Hughes at prayer meeting one night. "Well, Sophronia," she began, "you were right and I was wrong. I was over to Theodosia's last evening and do you know she is actually learning to play, and she's as happy over it as if she had discovered a gold mine. I looked at her as she sat there last night with the lamplight shining on her gray hair, and I said to myself, 'I'm glad Theodosia lived to get that piano and to enjoy it.' Why, it's almost a religion to hear her. As you said, you and I have our children and their interests, but she has that piano."

And it was true. Into Miss Theodosia's gray life the cheer and warmth

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